

# INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS



Statement of  
Harold A. Schaitberger  
General President  
International Association of Fire Fighters

Hearing on Social Security's Finances  
Before the  
The House Ways and Means  
Subcommittee on Social Security

June 23, 2011

I would like to thank Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Becerra, and the members of this distinguished subcommittee for the opportunity to present the views of the nation's professional fire fighters and emergency medical personnel on the vitally important issue of Social Security's finances. My name is Harold Schaitberger and I have the honor of serving as General President of the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF). I speak today on behalf of the nearly 300,000 men and women who risk their lives to provide fire rescue and emergency medical services protection to over 85 percent of our nation's population.

Every day in America, fire fighters place their lives on the line to protect their neighbors, and all too often they pay the ultimate price. We were once again reminded of the dangers of our profession just two weeks ago when we lost our brothers Vincent Perez and Tony Valerio as they battled a house fire in San Francisco. Their memory, bravery and dedication will live on with their brothers and sisters at Engine Company 26 and throughout the IAFF.

Every fire fighter knows that the next alarm may be our last, but we do not flinch and we do not waiver. We fulfill our duty because that's who we are. We ask for neither fame nor fortune, but we do ask that fire fighters who spend their career serving their communities are able to retire with dignity. And we especially ask that our brothers and sisters who suffer career-ending injuries and the survivors of those who make the ultimate sacrifice are provided for.

That is why I urge this committee to reject proposals that would undermine the pension, disability and survivor benefits we have worked so hard to develop. Unfortunately, forcing all fire fighters into the Social Security system would do exactly that. Especially in the current budgetary environment, municipalities would be unable to afford to contribute to both Social Security and fire fighter retirement systems. Forcing jurisdictions to pay into Social Security would lead to the collapse of pension systems that have provided retirement, disability and survivor benefits to generations of public safety officers.

Consider the city of Memphis, Tennessee, which currently contributes 5% of employees' pay into a retirement system that includes retirement, disability and survivor benefits. If Memphis employees were brought into Social Security, the city would be required to pay more for a retirement plan that delivers far less in benefits. It is simply wishful thinking to suggest that the city could pay both the 6.2% Social Security payroll tax and still contribute 5% into their own city plan. The inevitable result would be that Memphis, like hundreds of other jurisdictions facing similar circumstances, would simply abolish their current pension system.

When the Social Security system was created in 1935, government employees were expressly excluded. Even when state and local governments were given the option to join the system in the 1950s, many fire departments were still legally barred from electing Social Security coverage until 1994. Because of this long exclusion from the Social Security system, local governments created pension systems that addressed the unique needs of fire fighters without Social Security.

Today, an estimated 70 percent of all fire fighters are covered by pension plans that are independent of Social Security. Instead, they participate in specialized fire fighter pension plans that have been designed to reflect the unique circumstances of their profession, including early retirement ages and high rates of disability.

Historically, public safety agencies have sought to ensure a younger, physically fit workforce by promoting earlier retirement ages for fire fighters and law enforcement officers than other occupations. Many local jurisdictions, as well as the federal government, have mandatory retirement ages which require a fire fighter to leave their job at a certain age. Our pension plans reflect this reality and typically allow fire fighters to retire in their 50s.

As you know, the earliest age when beneficiaries can withdraw Social Security payments is 62, and doing so would result in reduced payments. Retiring at age 62 or at the normal retirement age of 67 for beneficiaries born in 1960 or later would undermine the policy goal of having a younger, more physically fit, public safety workforce. We do not believe it is wise public policy to force a fire fighter to remain on the job after they are no longer capable of performing their duties, just so they can begin to collect their partial or full Social Security benefits.

Our defined benefit pension plans also offer greater protection than Social Security in the event of an injury. The Social Security definition of “disabled” is far more stringent than the definition contained in fire fighter pension systems. The vast majority of fire fighters who suffer career-ending injuries would not be eligible to receive Social Security disability benefits, and they could be left with little means of support. Similarly, Social Security survivor benefits pale in comparison to the benefits fire service pensions pay to the widows and dependent children of those fire fighters who fall in the line of duty.

In short, dismantling fire fighter retirement systems in favor of Social Security would be cruelest to our most vulnerable.

In addition to the harm that would come to fire fighters if their retirement systems are dismantled, mandatory Social Security coverage would also impose a heavy payroll tax on middle-income workers. Most fire fighters contribute toward their retirement, but their annual payment is often less than the 6.2% Social Security payroll tax. As a result, public safety officers would be forced to pay thousands of additional dollars in taxes each year. Like other middle-income wage earners, fire fighters are struggling in the current economy and imposing this hefty tax increase would take a significant toll on family budgets.

And what, exactly, would be the benefit to the federal government of this wholesale disruption of fire fighter retirement systems and the heavy tax increase imposed on them? Very little indeed. A GAO report found that including newly hired public employees in Social Security would extend the solvency of the Social Security Trust Fund by only two years. Jeopardizing fire fighter retirement security is too heavy a price to pay for such a small contribution to Social Security’s fiscal challenges.

While it cannot be questioned that Social Security’s finances must be addressed, fire fighters and other State and local government employees should not be forced into the system as a way to simply generate revenue. Doing so would ignore the repercussions that would ensue, damaging State and local governments and the public servants who eschew careers in the private sector for the privilege of serving the public.

At tragic times, this dedication to community and country leads to the greatest sacrifice, such as our heroic brothers Lt. Vincent Perez and Tony Valerio. I urge this subcommittee to honor their sacrifices and look to other ways to shore up the Social Security program.